

Message Text

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PAGE 01 BOGOTA 02784 01 OF 02 251908Z
ACTION OES-06

INFO OCT-01 ARA-06 ISO-00 PM-04 CIAE-00 INR-07 NSAE-00
DODE-00 COME-00 NSF-01 INT-05 L-03 /033 W
-----251932Z 108356 /45 42
P 242122Z MAR 77 CCY MCN CORRECTION
FM AMEMBASSY BOGOTA
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 660

LIMITED OFFICIAL USE SECTION 1 OF 2 BOGOTA 2784

E.O. 11652: N/A
TAGS: OCLR, TGEN, CO
SUBJECT: ALPHA HELIX EXPEDITION (PHASE VII) LETICIA INCIDENT

REF: (A) STATE 053474; (B) BOGOTA 2200; (C) STATE 045178;
(D) ERB-SMITH TELECON MARCH 15; (E) STATE 065582

FOLLOWING IS CHRONOLOGICAL SUMMARY OF EVENTS SURROUNDING
VISIT OF ALPHA HELIX TO LETICIA AND TREATMENT OF VESSEL
BY COLOMBIAN NAVAL AUTHORITIES.

1. FIRST INFORMATION RECEIVED REGARDING ALPHA HELIX PROBLEM
WITH PERMISSION TO VISIT LETICIA WAS TELEPHONE CALL FROM
WILLIAM ERB IN DEPARTMENT (REF D). UPON RECEIPT OF THIS INFOR-
MATION, EMBASSY ATTEMPTED LOCALLY TO DETERMINE STATUS OF MATTER
AND REASONS FOR PROBLEM.

2. MATTER WAS DISCUSSED WITH CAPT. CRUZ, OFFICIAL IN DIRECCION
GENERAL MARITIMA Y PORTUARIA WITH WHOM VISIT HAD BEEN DIS-
CUSSED
PREVIOUSLY (REF B). HE STATED THAT VESSEL HAD ARRIVED LETICIA ON
SUNDAY, MARCH 13 WITHOUT PRIOR APPROVAL FOR VISIT AND WAS IN
PORT AT THAT TIME ILLEGALLY. HE SAID COLOMBIAN NAVY DEPARTMENT
HAD ISSUED INSTRUCTIONS THAT VESSEL SHOULD LEAVE IMMEDIATELY.

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PAGE 02 BOGOTA 02784 01 OF 02 251908Z

3. AT SAME TIME EMBASSY SENT TELEX TO SHIP'S AGENT IN LETICIA
(TSALIKIS BROTHERS) ASKING FOR INFORMATION AND REQUESTING
THEM TO CONTACT EMBASSY.

4. AT APPROXIMATELY 1345 HOURS SAME DAY EMBASSY RECEIVED PHONE
CALL FROM MASTER OF VESSEL WHO STATED THAT HE HAD BEEN INFORMED
EARLY ON MARCH 14 THAT HE DID NOT HAVE PERMISSION TO STAY IN

PORT AND WAS ORDERED TO LEAVE. HE CLAIMED ALL OF HIS PAPERS WERE IN ORDER. HE SAID PORT CAPTAIN TOLD HIM ORDERS HAD BEEN RECEIVED FROM BOGOTA (GERERAL NINO, DG/MP AND MIN FOREIGN RELATIONS) BEFORE HIS ARRIVAL TO REFUSE ENTRY TO ALPHA HELIX. HE ALSO STATED PORT CAPTAIN SEEMED TO BE WILLING TO BE LENIENT REGARDING TIME OF DEPARTURE. TELEPHONE CONNECTION WAS EXTREMELY BAD AND MASTER OF VESSEL COULD NOT HEAR EMBASSY OFFICER. CONVERSATION WAS THEREFORE ONE SIDED.

5. EMBASSY THEN CONTACTED CLARA NIETO PONCE DE LEON, DIRECTOR OF VISAS DIVISION OF FOREIGN MINISTRY, WHICH IS OFFICE CHARGED WITH RESPONSIBILITY FOR SCIENTIFIC EXPEDITION. SHE CLAIMED NO KNOWLEDGE OF PROBLEM AND STATED SHE HAD NOT ISSUED ANY INSTRUCTIONS REFUSING ENTRY TO ALPHA HELIX.

6. EMBASSY ALSM CONTACTED COLONEL JULIO LONDONO, CHIEF, DIVISION OF FRONTIERS IN FOREIGN MINISTRY. AT TIME CONTACT WAS ATTEMPTED HE WAS IN A MEETING AND UNAVAILABLE. IN INTERVAL EMBASSY REQUESTED OFFICER IN CHARGE USMILGROUP TO DETERMINE, IF POSSIBLE, ORIGIN OF INSTRUCTIONS REFUSING ENTRY TO ALPHA HELIX. SINCE MASTER OF VESSEL HAD CLAIMED THAT ORDER CAME FROM GENERAL NINO, COMMANDANT OF COLOMBIAN MARINE CORPS, (THIS SAME INFORMATION HAD BEEN RELAYED TO WILLIAM ERB IN DEPARTMENT FROM SCRIPPS INSTITUTE). MILGP OFFICER CHECKED AND DETERMINED THAT GEN. NINO WAS NOT INVOLVED IN MATTER, BUT THAT APPARENTLY DECISION HAD BEEN TAKEN IN DGMP BY CAPT. CRUZ AND HIS SUPERIOR ADMIRAL CEDIEL. AT THIS POINT EMBASSY WAS ABLE TO TALK WITH COL. LONDONO WHO CLAIMED NO KNOWLEDGE OF THE MATTER BUT PROMISED TO CONTACT CHIEF OF STAFF OF COLOMBIAN NAVY AND LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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PAGE 03 BOGOTA 02784 01 OF 02 251908Z

REQUEST SHIP BE GRANTED PERMISSION TO REMAIN FOR TIME NECESSARY TO COMPLETE TAKING IN SUPPLIES AND PASSENGERS.

7. WITHIN HALF HOUR MESSAGE WAS RECEIVED FROM COL. LONDONO STATING THAT INSTRUCTIONS FROM COMMANDER OF COLOMBIAN NAVY WERE BEING SENT TO PORT CAPTAIN IN LETICIA TO PERMIT ALPHA HELIX TO REMAIN TIME NECESSARY.

8. ON FOLLOWING MORNING, MARCH 16, EMBASSY SENT TELEX TO SHIP'S AGENT IN LETICIA GIVING INFORMATION RECEIVED FROM COLONEL LONDONO AND REQUESTING PRECISE INFORMATION ON DOCUMENTS PROVIDED AND OTHER REQUIREMENTS TO OBTAIN PORT CLEARANCE IN EARLIER VISITS OF ALPHA HELIX AND THOSE BEING REQUESTED IN CURRENT VISIT. (NOTE: NO REPLY HAS YET BEEN RECEIVED TO THIS MESSAGE).

9. LATER SAME DAY, MARCH 16 AT 1700 HOURS EMBASSY RECEIVED TELEPHONE CALL FROM LETICIA FROM MEMBER OF ALPHA HELIX CREW. HE STATED THAT VESSEL HAD BEEN GRANTED PERMISSION TO STAY UNTIL

0600 HOURS MARCH 17. HE AND REPRESENTATIVE OF SHIP'S AGENT, WHO ALSO SPOKE ON PHONE, CLAIMED TELEX (PARA 8 ABOVE) NOT RECEIVED. HOWEVER, THEY STATED DOCUMENTATION PROVIDED UPON ARRIVAL FOR THIS VISIT WAS SAME AS FOR PREVIOUS VISITS.

10. EMBASSY THEN ATTEMPTED CONTACT COLONEL LONDONO BUT LEARNED HE HAD LEFT WITH PRESIDENTIAL PARTY FOR OFFICIAL VISIT TO COSTA RICA. HOWEVER, HIS SECRETARY INFORMED EMBASSY (IN REPLY TO QUESTION) THAT COLONEL LONDONO HAD SPOKEN TO ADMIRAL CEDIEL REGARDING EXTENSION OF TIME FOR ALPHA HELIX. SHE SUBSEQUENTLY CALLED OFFICE OF CHIEF OF OPERATIONS OF COLOMBIAN NAVY WHO REQUESTED THAT A NOTE BE PROVIDED BY THE EMBASSY REQUESTING THAT THE VESSEL BE ALLOWED TO REMAIN FOR THE TIME NECESSARY. THIS NOTE WAS TO BE ADDRESSED TO ADMIRAL BARONA, CHIEF OF OPERATIONS, AND WAS TO BE DELIVERED FIRST THING FOLLOWING MORNING.

11. AS REQUESTED BRIEF LETTER WAS DELIVERED TO OFFICE OF LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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PAGE 04 BOGOTA 02784 01 OF 02 251908Z

ADMIRAL BARONA AT 0930, MARCH 17. LATER IN DAY EMBASSY RECEIVED TELEPHONE CALL FROM CAPT. CRUZ WHO INDICATED ADMIRAL BARONA HAD REQUESTED AN EXPLANATION FROM DGMP AS TO WHY THIS PROBLEM HAD ARISEN. IN PHONE CONVERSATION CAPT. CRUZ AGAIN INSISTED THAT REQUEST FOR PRIOR PERMISSION AND NECESSARY DOCUMENTS (REFTEL B) HAD NOT BEEN COMPLIED WITH BY SHIP'S AGENT AND THAT DGMP HAD BEEN GENEROUS IN RESPONDING TO REQUEST FROM FOREIGN MINISTRY (COLONEL LONDONO) BY GRANTING AN EXTENSION OF 36 HOURS (I.E. UNTIL 0600 HOURS MARCH 17). HE SAID THAT HE CONSIDERED THE THREE DAYS THE SHIP HAD BEEN IN LETICIA SUFFICIENT TIME TO HAVE TAKEN ON ALL SUPPLIES NECESSARY AND TO HAVE BOARDED THE PASSENGERS. HE SAID THE PORT CAPTAIN HAD BEEN ORDERED TO COME TO BOGOTA TO EXPLAIN THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE ARRIVAL OF ALPHA HELIX AND SUBSEQUENT DEVELOPMENTS.

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PAGE 01 BOGOTA 02784 02 OF 02 251907Z
ACTION OES-06

INFO OCT-01 ARA-06 ISO-00 PM-04 CIAE-00 INR-07 NSAE-00
DODE-00 COME-00 NSF-01 INT-05 L-03 /033 W
-----251929Z 108327 /45 42

P 242122Z MAR 77 CCY MCN CORRECTION
FM AMEMBASSY BOGOTA
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 661

LIMITED OFFICIAL USE SECTION 2 OF 2 BOGOTA 2784

12. ON MORNING MARCH 18, EMBASSY RECEIVED TELEX FROM MASTER OF VESSEL STATING THAT HE HAD BEEN OBLIGED TO DEPART LETICIA AT 0600 HOURS MARCH 17 AND HAD LEFT COLOMBIAN TERRITORIAL WATERS. IN TELEX HE PROTESTED "TOTALLY UNPROVOKED AND OFFENSIVE TREATMENT U.S. FLAG VESSEL SEEKING REPLENISHMENT IN A COLOMBIAN PORT."

13. TWO POINTS APPEAR IMPORTANT IN EXPLAINING CAUSE OF THIS INCIDENT. FROM INFORMATION AVAILABLE IT APPEARS THAT SHIP'S AGENT DID NOT MAKE PRIOR REQUEST FOR CLEARANCE IN THE FORMAT AND WITH THE INFORMATION REQUIRED (INDICATED IN REFTEL B). THIS CLEARLY GAVE DGMP BASIS FOR INSTRUCTIONS REFUSING ENTRY OF VESSEL TO PORT OF LETICIA. HOWEVER, BEHAVIOR OF DGMP OFFICIAL RESPONXLE (CAPT. CRUZ). HIS ATTITUDE IN CONVERSATIONS WITH EMBASSY AND HIS "BY THE BOOK" TREATMENT OF THE ALPHA HELIX MATTER STRONGLY IMPLY A PRIOR DECISION ON HIS PART TO BE UNCOOPERATIVE AND TO USE WHATEVER TECHNICALITY AVAILABLE TO REFUSE PERMISSION FOR ALPHA HELIX TO REMAIN IN PORT.

14. BECAUSE OF VIRTUAL IMPOSSIBILITY OF CONTACTING MASTER OF ALPHA HELIX AND IN VIEW OF FAILURE OF SHIP'S AGENT TO RESPOND TO EMBASSY'S REQUESTS FOR INFORMATION, WE WERE UNABLE FOR SEVERAL DAYS TO DETERMINE WHETHER VESSEL HAD BEEN ABLE TO COMPLETE NECESSARY OPERATIONS DURING THE TIME IT WAS IN PORT.
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PAGE 02 BOGOTA 02784 02 OF 02 251907Z

EMBASSY SUBSEQUENTLY LEARNED (MARCH 22) FROM MEMBER SHIP'S CREW THAT ALL FOOD SUPPLIES AND FUEL NEEDED HAD BEEN LOADED. IN FACT SHIP MOVED ONLY A FEW HUNDRED YARDS TO PERUVIAN SIDE OF RIVER AND CONTINUED TO MOVE PERSONNEL AND SUPPLIES BACK AND FORTH TO LETICIA BY BOAT.

15. DURING AFTERNOON OF MARCH 21 EMBASSY RECEIVED PHONE CALL FROM BROTHER OF SHIP'S AGENT, GEORGE TSALIKIS STATING THAT SCIENTIFIC SUPPLIES SENT BY AIR FREIGHT FROM U.S. FOR ALPHA HELIX WERE BEING HELD BY CUSTOMS IN LETICIA BECAUSE SHIPMENT HAD BEEN SENT IMPROPERLY TO SHIP'S AGENT AND NOT "IN TRANSIT" TO THE ALPHA HELIX. TSALIKIS SAID THAT MEMBER OF SHIP'S CREW WOULD FLY TO BOGOTA AND CALL AT EMBASSY MORNING OF MARCH 22 TO REQUEST EMBASSY ASSISTANCE. ALSO ON AFTERNOON OF MARCH 21. EMBASSY RECEIVED TELEPHONE CALL FROM WILLIAM ERB IN DEPARTMENT RELAYING ESSENTIALLY THE SAME INFORMATION.

16. AT 0900 HOURS MARCH 22, EMBASSY RECEIVED CALL FROM DENNIS POPP, ALPHA HELIX CREW MEMBER ASKING FOR HELP IN RESOLVING CUSTOMS PROBLEM IN LETICIA. HE CAME IMMEDIATELY TO EMBASSY AND EXPLAINED THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE CUSTOMS PROBLEM. EMBASSY CONTACTED CHIEF OF LEGAL DEPARTMENT IN CUSTOMS ADMINISTRATION AND ASKED HIM TO RECEIVE POPP AND ASSIST HIM TO RESOLVE PROBLEM. ALTHOUGH INITIALLY POPP WAS RELUCTANT TO SEE CUSTOMS OFFICIAL, HE WAS EVENTUALLY PERSUADED THAT THIS WOULD BE THE ONLY EFFECTIVE WAY TO RESOLVE PROBLEM IN TIMELY MANNER. HE VISITED CUSTOMS OFFICIAL AND ARRANGEMENTS WERE MADE TO INSTRUCT CUSTOMS CHIEF IN LETICIA TO RELEASE THE SUPPLIES.

17. CONCLUSION - ALTHOUGH THE ALPHA HELIX AFFAIR CAN NOT BE CONSIDERED CLOSED UNTIL THE VESSEL IS GONE FROM THE AREA OF THE COLOMBIAN AMAZON, SOME GENERAL COMMENTS CAN BE MADE. FIRST, EMBASSY HAS EXPENDED AN INORDINATE AMOUNT OF TIME AND EFFORT IN ATTEMPTS TO REMEDY SITUATION CAUSED BY OVERSIGHTS OR FAILURES TO FOLLOW INSTRUCTIONS ON PART OF EXPEDITION. SINCE JAN 1, 1977 A MINIMUM OF 120 MAN HOURS HAS BEEN SPENT ON PROBLEMS INVOLVING LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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PAGE 03 BOGOTA 02784 02 OF 02 251907Z

ALPHA HELIX WHICH COULD HAVE BEEN AVOIDED IF PROPER PROCEDURES HAD BEEN FOLLOWED.

SECOND, EMBASSY CONSIDERS THAT FAILURE TO OBTAIN COLOMBIAN GOVERNMENT APPROVAL TO CONDUCT PHASE VII IN COLOMBIA, INITIAL REFUSAL TO ALLOW SHIP TO ENTER LETICIA AND PROBLEM IN OBTAINING RELEASE OF SCIENTIFIC EQUIPMENT FROM CUSTOMS WERE ALL CAUSED PRINCIPALLY BY DISREGARD ON PART OF THOSE IN CHARGE OF THE ALPHA HELIX EXPEDITION OF COLOMBIAN LAWS AND REGULATIONS GOVERNING THESE MATTERS AND THE SENSITIVITIES OF THE COLOMBIAN OFFICIALS CONCERNED. EMBASSY STRONGLY RECOMMENDS THAT BEFORE DEPARTMENT AGREES TO ASSIST ANY FUTURE U.S. SCIENTIFIC EXPEDITION WISHING TO WORK IN COLOMBIA, A RESPONSIBLE OFFICIAL OF THE EXPEDITION BE SENT TO COLOMBIA FOR COMPLETE ON-THE-SPOT BRIEFINGS FROM EMBASSY AND COLOMBIAN OFFICIALS INVOLVED. SANCHEZ

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Message Attributes

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Executive Order: N/A
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Subject: ALPHA HELIX EXPEDITION (PHASE VII) LETICIA INCIDENT
TAGS: OCLR, TGEN, CO
To: STATE
Type: TE
vdkgvwkey: odbc://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/9e4d20b3-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Review Markings:
Margaret P. Grafeld
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
22 May 2009
Markings: Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 22 May 2009